Krzysztof Fordonski

William Butler Yeats and the Irish Coinage

[77] Non-literary activities of writers or poets seldom arise much interest of scholars unless they are of crucial importance or have a tangible influence on their work. They are usually even less interesting for coin-collectors whose attention may only rarely be drawn to a mysterious portrait on a foreign coin. And yet, sometimes when we dig deeper into writers' biographies we may find information that will tell us something more about coins from our own collections. Coins which seemed common may start to mean a little more to us.

Public activities of the Irish poet and playwright William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) were so many and so various, especially at the turn of the centuries, they were so much connected with his literary work that even his chairing the Commission on Coinage, "his most notable contribution to the proceedings of the Seanad", as his biographer J. Norman Jeaffres called it, is very often neglected. One might agree that these activities to which he
applied his shaping skills as the Irish Manuscripts, Literary Copyright, the Lane pictures, the National Museum, the National Gallery and Art School to mention but a few, were, if compared to his literary achievements, of mediocre importance. The question must be asked therefore why such an eminent man, Nobel Prize winner, a poet universally recognized by his peers as the greatest poet writing in the English language of this century participated in such activities?

J. Norman Jeffares claims that Yeats "had an immense capacity to love and serve". Most probably, Yeats perceived his participation in the creation of the Irish Free State, Saorstat Eireann, as just another way of serving his fatherland. Yeats himself wrote, with an outstanding modesty, in a letter to Mrs. Shakespear dated 28 June 1923 that the Senators were like "coral insects with some design in our heads of the ultimate island." His patriotism must be stressed here, as Saorstat Eireann was not the Ireland Yeats had dreamed of, a faint echo of his feelings may be found in the poem "Sailing to Byzantium".

Yeats, although not really an aristocrat himself, had always imagined the independent Irish state as a republic ruled by the Protestant minority, an ameliorated version of Ireland from the times of the Grattan's Parliament, the very end of the 18th century. The Irish Free State, however, was not a Protestant-dominated aristocratic Republic but a Roman Catholic farmers' democracy. The poet saw the difference clearly when he tried in vain to protest in the Seanad against restricting the rights of the Protestant
minority. Yeats might have found great many reasons to remain aloof. He [78] would not be the only one to do so, as the compromising treaty with the United Kingdom signed in December 1921 did not satisfy many of the Irish. In the following year, the treaty became the cause of Civil War, Yeats, however, decided that it was his duty to remain active.

Yeats was nominated Seanadoir in 1922, but due to the Civil War he took his seat only in the summer 1923, finally becoming as he ironically put it in his poem "Among School Children" the "sixty-year-old smiling public men." The poet, although since his early youth he was very active on the public stage, was never too much interested in politics. In a discussion with Lord Cromer, he announced that "he looked on English politics as a child does at a racecourse, taking sides by the colour of the jockey's coats, and often changing sides in the middle of a race." J. Norman Jeffares judged his speech on the subject of divorce made in the Senate in June 1925 as "tactless". Although the poet was most probably right in protesting against the measures introduced by the Free State Government to prohibit divorce which he called "grossly oppressive" to the Protestant minority "one result of the speech was that Yeats was unlikely to be re-elected as a Senator in 1928. Ireland with its devotion to abstract principles, while possessing love of private argument, lacks the ability to forget such outbursts."

As a Senator Yeats was, apart from the activities listed above, "responsible for the designs of Charles Shannon
being adopted for the robes of district judges in the Free State". He "spoke eloquently on the subject of censorship and one of his objects was founding the Irish Academy of Letters". However, his most important artistic task from our point of view came in 1926 when he was elected the Chairman of the Commission on Coinage, which sat from 1926 to 1928.

William Butler Yeats was probably the best candidate for the post. He came from a family of artists, his father John Butler Yeats was a painter influenced by the Pre-Raphaelites, while his brother, Jack Butler Yeats, was one of the most eminent Irish painters and engravers of the first half of the 20th century. Yeats was also a disciple of William Morris, the English poet and philosopher, who coined the phrase "the lesser arts" and who saw it as a duty of an artist to educate aesthetically also the lower classes. Morris introduced his ideals into practice - he established a publishing house the Kelmscott Press, famous for its aesthetically superior publications, and a company that produced furniture, screens and wallpapers of the highest quality, which shaped the tastes of the Victorian era.

Yeats' interest in arts was very vast and embraced also the ancient coinage, his studies on that subject, conducted in the British Museum, greatly influenced the future Irish coinage, just as his extensive studies of ancient Greek and Byzantine philosophy and art. The fact that since the 1890s he sat in various committees of nationalist and literary societies and he was very effective indeed was also of certain importance.
The experience he had gathered during the years of his public work proved priceless during the sessions of the commission. G. S. Fraser accuses Yeats that although he was "a natural leader ... liked to disguise himself as a follower, even of smaller men" this quality also proved valuable though the side-effect of it is that it is sometimes difficult to establish which of the proposals put forward during the sessions were made by Yeats himself.

The proceedings of the commission began in 1926. There was no need for rush as the Irish Free State could continue to use British coins as a dominion. Quite on the contrary, national coinage was to an extent a whim; the decision to introduce it was caused by political rather than economical reasons. The situation (which by the way remained largely the same until the Punt started to differ in value from the British Pound) brought about one significant limitation - the coins had to be identical in size, diameter and alloy to current British coins, that is to farthing, halfpenny, penny, threepence, sixpence, shilling, florin and half-crown. Striking gold coins was ruled out at the very beginning.

Habitually, any coins struck for British colonies and dominions bore the Royal effigy. The Irish Seanadoirs, however, very quickly decided against preserving that tradition. The situation of the commission was quite convenient, as there was no local tradition, which would have to be maintained. Never in the history were there purely national Irish coins. The first coins struck in Ireland about 995, in the so called Hiberno-Norse period, were,
according to R. J. Marles' *Collectors Coins: Ireland*: "imitations, in the main, of English or Scandinavian coinage". They were also struck by Sihtric III Silkbeard, a Viking monarch of Dublin, and not by any of the native Celtic rulers. Any coins struck later either in Ireland or for the use in Ireland were produced by the British monarchs, consequently almost nothing of the Celtic tradition found any reflection on those coins. The only Irish motive on coins was the harp which appeared for the first time during the reign of Henry VIII and was retained as the symbol of Ireland until 1823 when striking of coins for Ireland was discontinued. The harp, contrary to the general opinion, is a symbol, not the official coat of arms of Ireland which consists of four coats of arms of four Irish provinces - Munster, Leinster, Ulster, and Connacht.

It may be quite safely assumed that the commission did not expect the proceedings to take as long as they did. A similar commission organized to provide designs for the first Irish postage stamps sat only for a few months and the stamps were ready within the first year of the existence of the Irish Free State. It was probably at least to an extent because of Yeats' influence that the commission did not accept just any designs but aimed at achieving the best artistically possible results. William Butler Yeats stated this clearly in his *Report of the Commission on Coinage*.

The first session of the commission established that the coins should present national symbols and heroes. The serious scientific research started consequently by the commission revealed, however, that all the existing
portraits of Saint Patrick, the saint patron of Ireland, or of Brian Boru, the most eminent ruler of medieval Ireland, were purely imaginary. It was also proved that the tradition according to which clover was used by Saint Patrick to explain the mystery of the Holy Trinity to the Irish was invented in the Baroque period.

The conception of commemorating the fighters for independence was as short lived as the previous one. The commission could not agree either on the list of names or on the succession. The right choice seemed impossible, especially since the commission sat only ten years after the Easter Rising, five years after the establishing of the Irish Free State and three years after the end of the Civil War. The memories were all too fresh, many of the heroes were active on the political scene, some as Eamon de Valera still waited for their return to politics and the only conclusion of the session was that the designs must be politically neutral lest they should cause a general dispute.

The commission decided that it must take a closer look at coins from various countries, on the one hand to get to know the general tendencies while on the other hand to seek sculptors who could design the Irish coins. The research in foreign coinage did not bring any specific results, as even in that time many nations were proud exclusively of the fact that they could use Arabic numerals and Latin script. The commission decided to rule out generally accepted symbols as wreath of oak leaves or wheat ears. It was only then that William Butler Yeats proposed that Irish coins should depict animals of Ireland.
Yeats was fascinated by the art and culture of the ancient Greece and took as models for the Irish coinage various coins, mainly struck in the ancient Greek colonies in Italy. The commission accepted this proposal and during the following meeting a final list was drawn. The coins were to depict *feoirling* (farthing) - a woodcock, *leat pingin* (half-penny) - a pig or a ram, the choice was left up to the sculptor, *pingin* (penny) - a hen, *leat reul* (threepence) - a hare, *reul* (sixpence) - a wolfhound, *scilling* (shilling) - a bull, *fliorin* (florin) - a salmon, *leat coroin* (half-crown) - a hunter.¹

It is worth pointing out that the proposed animals symbolized the ideal Ireland imagined by Yeats. The animals on coins fall naturally into two groups - one connected with farm life - pig, ram, hen and bull and the other with hunting and gentry - woodcock, hare, wolfhound and hunter.

The commission decided also on the design of the obverse identical for the whole set depicting a harp (Brian Boru’s harp, which is exhibited in Dublin Trinity College was chosen for that purpose), words "Saorstat Eireann" and the date. The expression of face value turned a certain problem which was solved by putting the denomination twice - in words in Irish Gaelic and in numerals for the benefit of those as Yeats himself put it "who were too old, too stupid or too busy as myself to learn Irish."

The commission organized a closed competition. Seven sculptors from all over Europe were sent invitations with

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¹ Hunter refers to a horse suitable for hunting.
the list of demands, the sculptors were asked to submit their designs in clay. William Butler Yeats proposed Carl Milles, famous Swedish sculptor who designed the 2 crown coin commemorating king Gustavus I Vasa issued in 1921 (KM 799) which Yeats admired when he went to Stockholm to receive the Nobel Prize in 1923. Among other sculptors were Publio Morbiducci from Italy, as well as Paul Manship and Percy Metcalfe from England.

[81] The designs were submitted very quickly in the end of 1927. Publio Morbiducci went as far as to prepare essays in bronze at his own expense. The initial intention of the commission was to choose one coin of each set but when the essays were presented the decision was almost unequivocal. Percy Metcalfe who presented modern but naturalistic images of the animals was the unquestionable winner. Yeats himself favoured the designs of Milles but agreed with majority. Some discussion was caused by Morbiducci's design of half-crown depicting a beautiful stallion but finally the commission decided against splitting the Metcalfe's set. The designs were accepted after minor alterations. The coins were struck in Birmingham mint after the acceptation by the Senate of the report in which Yeats "brilliantly presented his Commission's findings and its selection [ ... ] and so because of his work and the Commission's Ireland possesses a superbly designed coinage" as J. Norman Jeffares put it.

[82] Throughout the two year period the Commission regularly announced the results of its proceedings in Irish newspapers. The citizens were at first asked to send in their
proposals concerning the future coinage, later on information about the proposed subjects and finally the Metcalfe's designs were placed in the daily press. The reaction was almost non-existent, storm broke out when the coins were put into circulation in 1928. The provincial clergy sent especially fierce letters to the press. One of such letters reached Yeats in Italy, he wrote about in his letter to Thomas Bodkin - "I see an occasional Irish newspaper and noticed some letter or speech which said we were all under the influence of Freemasons who wanted to drive out of Ireland all the traces of Christian Religion" The discussion ended, however, with an acceptation of the coins.

The coins underwent throughout the following 73 years two general changes. In 1937, when Saorstat Eireann became Poblacht na h'Eireann, Republic of Ireland, the obverse of all coins was slightly changed, the name of the country has been since "Eire". Percy Metcalfe, who used the opportunity to introduce minor changes to the designs, prepared the new dies.

In 1971, when the decimal system was introduced in Ireland as well as in Great Britain, only shilling and florin coins remained in circulation and they continued to be produced with new denominations, as 5 and 10 new pence coins respectively. The designs of other coins were used again on new 50 pence and later (in 1986) 20 pence coins. As Percy Metcalfe refused to design new 1/2, 1 and 2 pence coins, new designs were prepared which depicted fantastic fowls from medieval Irish manuscripts.
In 1990, a one-pound coin with red deer was added to the set. The same design was used also for the three silver and gold semi-official coins commemorating an EEC Council meeting in Dublin denominated in ecu also issued in 1990. Although in the mid-1990s Bank of Ireland proposed a return to the original designs on new 1 and 2 pence coins, the plans were not fulfilled.

Unfortunately, the spirit of William Butler Yeats must have been terribly busy elsewhere in the end of the 1990s when Bank of Ireland prepared the designs for the Irish euro coins. The harp, however charming, stands out among other national euro sets as one of the least inspiring designs.

Depicting local animals on current coins has become since a generally accepted thing. Only within the last few years many newly emerged countries like Latvia (cow and salmon, later also ant), Croatia (salmon and bear), Slovenia (recently horse, stork and bull), Macedonia (salmon, seagull and wolf) as well as Finland (swans on their 2 euro coin), and Hungary (hawk) showed the local fauna on their coinage.

William Butler Yeats understood his participation in the commission on coinage as on the one hand citizen's duty towards his country as well as on the other hand as an artist's duty to produce objects of art. Consequently, he did his best to provide his fatherland with most beautiful coins which was also a part of the aesthetic education of the nation as defined in the poem "To a Wealthy Man who promised a Second Subscription to the Dublin Municipal Gallery if it were proved the People wanted Pictures". The
poet [83] fully expressed his views on the new coinage during a lecturing tour in the United States in the late 1920s. The coins remain in a way his monument, although anonymous a proof of his love for his country. Yeats understood it perfectly well as in one of his letters he quoted a poem by Austin Dobson entitled "Ars Victrix"

All passes. Art alone
Enduring stays to us;
The Bust outlasts the throne
The Coin, Tiberius.

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